DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 043 633 TE 002 073

AUTHOR	LaConte, Ronald; LaConte, Christine
TITLE	English English: New Ideas for New Teachers.
INSTITUTION	New England Association of Teachers of English, Burlington, Vt.
PUB DATE	Feb 70
NOTE	5p.
JOURNAL CIT	Leaflet; v69 n1 p18-22 Feb 1970
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.35
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Environment, College Students, *Comparative Education, Cultural Exchange, Discussion (Teaching Technique), *Education Majors, Elementary Education, *English Education, Individualized Instruction, *Student Exchange Programs, Student Projects, *Teacher Education, Teaching Methods, Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS	*England

ABSTRACT

Since 1968, undergraduate education majors entering their senior year at the University of Connecticut have participated in a 7-week summer program in Great Britain, visiting a wide variety of schools, serving as teacher aides in urban and rural elementary classrooms, partaking in weekly seminars and field trips, and living in the homes of British faculty. (This process is then reversed in the fall when British students participate in a similar program at the University of Connecticut.) The American students, absorbing a loose British classroom structure which centers on discussion, a great deal of free writing, and individual student projects, have found that this experience enriches and broadens their ideas of the possibilities which abound in a student-centered classroom. (MF)

Leaflet, Vol. 69, No. 1,
February 1970.

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ENGLISH ENGLISH: NEW IDEAS FOR NEW TEACHERS

by RONALD and CHRISTINE LaCONTE

In the more than three years since the Dartmouth Seminar (more properly, the Anglo-American Conference on the Teaching of English) there has been much talk about how the English teach English. We have had book-length reports of the Seminar's activities by John Dixon and Herbert Muller, a large-scale study of English teaching in the United Kingdom by James Squire and Roger Applebee, and a multitude of articles, speeches, and panel discussions all attempting to compare and contrast British and American methods of teaching English. Undoubtedly, the most significant result of this interchange of ideas has been that it has caused many of the Americans involved to engage in some very serious questioning of their educational beliefs and practices. As Albert Marckwardt put it in his NCTE Presidential Address in 1967: "We have learned that English is being taught in Great Britain in ways that are markedly different from our own, often reflecting a set of educational assumptions and values which are not at all like ours. As I have said elsewhere, the excitement of the Dartmouth Seminar arose principally from this dramatic clash of ideas and values, and long after it was over, we were still pondering, assessing and probing."

What follows is a brief description of a program begun at the University of Connecticut in 1968 for the express purpose of bringing this "clash of ideas and values" into the undergraduate training of prospective American and British teachers.

The participants in the program, mostly undergraduate education majors entering their senior year, arrive by air in England about June 1 and proceed to Keswick Hall College in Norwich where they spend one week attending orientation lectures on British educational, political, economic, and social systems. (Early important lessons learned, for example, are that public schools are private, and that Norfolk broads are bodies of water, not female bodies.) Living on campus gives the American students a chance to mingle with British teachers-in-training as well as make a few preliminary visits to local schools and nearby places of historical and cultural interest.

At the end of the orientation period, the students move off campus into private homes. Frequently, these homes belong to members of the

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college staff, so that the students are able to experience living in a British home and still have the opportunity to "talk shop" in the evenings.

In preparation for the intensive experience which is soon to follow, the students spend the next several days visiting a wide variety of schools —state operated, independent, elementary, and secondary. They observe different programs, methods, and approaches and get a chance to talk with pupils and teachers. Frequently our students are asked to speak to a class or school assembly. At the end of these few days, the students are assigned—usually in pairs—as teacher aides in local elementary schools. (Because of end-of-year examinations, assignment to secondary schools is impractical.) The students participate in every phase of the instructional program working with small groups, tutoring individuals, accompanying the class on field trips, and even occasionally teaching an entire class. After spending two weeks in this manner, the students then move on to small one and two room rural schools where they work with pupils of widely differing ages and achievements in the same room.

At least once weekly the students return to Keswick Hall College for a late afternoon or evening seminar in which they discuss their experiences and compare and contrast British and American education. In addition, one weekly "field trip" is taken to a unusual educational institution, e.g., a boarding school, Summerhill, "immigrant" schools in Birmingham's inner city, innovative infant schools in Oxfordshire, a famous university, or a different college of education.

Most weekends are free, and on these weekends, the students often take trains to London, approximately two hours away. Occasionally, some travel as far as Amsterdam and Paris. On a certain few "planned weekends" bus trips are conducted to Wales and Scotland. A few students remain in the Norwich area to take local tours with host families. The last week before their return to the U.S. in mid-July, they are free to travel as they wish.

In September groups of British students from Keswick Hall College and Maria Grey College arrive in Connecticut to participate in a similar program in American schools. While living in faculty homes, the British students attend orientation lectures on the Storrs campus, visit local schools and places of special interest such as Boston, Hartford, the Saturday football game, and Yale University, and eventually participate as teacher aides in public schools throughout Connecticut.

In these brief seven weeks as the American students learn about English education, they inevitably begin a sometimes agonizing reap-

praisal of their own system of education. The following is an account of their observations, particularly in the teaching of English. Some of the views are presented in the students' own words (as they were recorded in their journals) in the hope that these words will reveal the professional impact that the experience in England has on these students.

In order to answer the question 'How do the English teach English?' some of our students found themselves examining British educational philosophy and a few of its underlying assumptions. Beginning with the child's earliest years in the Infant School, the British believe wholeheartedly in the unity of the school environment and in the dignity of the child:

> "At first (upon arriving in British Infant classroom) I was horrified at the lack of 'structure' I saw there—the noise level, the freedom of movement, the lack of rigid time limits on activities, the seemingly random arrangement of furniture and facilities, and, perhaps, most of all, the apparent lack of 'teaching.'
>
> "However, what I didn't realize is that British Johnny is expected to experience broad subject areas each day: spend some time on his "sums," read to his teacher for a little while, work on his ongoing project (whatever it might be, and it might be creative, such as pottery making, or constructive, such as vegetable farming), and play outdoors—but all of these ON HIS OWN TERMS."

That such young children could select their own experiences and be responsible for their own learning was an observation that constantly amazed our students:

> "I observed the master's class for three days, and I never once saw him teach a formal lesson."
>
> "Even with the Juniors (ages 8-11+) the teachers are nowhere near as formal as American teachers I have seen. They give more individual attention and spend a lot of time on projects. They do far less teaching to the whole class."
>
> "There is SO MUCH talking here, sometimes I think I'll go mad. Yet, when I stop to think about it, there's so much here to talk about! Why, the halls alone in this school look like an art museum with all that wonderful stuff the kids have made. And how many schools in the U.S. have a vegetable garden? Or a swimming pool?

So every time I gasp at these kids' verbal facility, I just try to remember that they have a lot to talk about around here . . ."

"After Physical Education the class sat down to a writing exercise about yesterday's thunderstorm which had dampened the annual Sports Day. Looking over some of their work, I couldn't believe their writing proficiency; these six year olds used words which American children learn in third or fourth grade, such as *pelting, sultry,* and *diesel.*"

The amount of individualized instruction in reading, writing, and "oracy" (currently, a fashionable term) was another topic of constant comment. Our students were most favorably impressed with the emphasis on personal instructional aids:

"Each page [in his personal dictionary] is reserved for a different alphabet letter. Every time he uses a new word he adds it to his dictionary. If he needs a new word and doesn't know how to spell it, he takes his dictionary to the teacher who enters the word for him . . . He then continues to use his dictionary for his story writing."

"These children select a topic in which they are interested. Then they read up on their topic in whatever books are available in the classroom library. Next, they plan and organize their topic books. Finally, they write and illustrate the books."

"After a visit to a twelfth century church the children wrote topic books on churches. Following much class discussion and some further research in books, the children wrote their topic books. I was surprised at how much they'd learned —especially such terms as *nave, transept,* etc."

American students also were impressed with the pupil-written poetry collections, which were beautifully bound (some of the classrooms had bookbinding equipment), and generally superior to similar work done by American pupils of the same age.

"I can't understand how these kids can speak and write so clearly—unless it's that they've been doing it daily in school since they were five . . . One boy told me that in his class they've been writing narratives, simple descriptions, poetry, and essays as far back as he could remember. I asked him if he had to submit these pieces for grades or for correction. He replied that occasionally his teacher would take a certain piece and

criticize it, but that most of the time he simply wrote because he enjoyed writing."

However, as much as they admired the individualized instruction, our students simply could not seem to tolerate the lack of formal grammar lessons or the seeming neglect of pupil errors in writing. While they accepted, intellectually, the English teachers' contention that regular grammar lessons and constant correction never have and never will lead to either fluency or precision of expression, they could not seem to adjust emotionally to this concept. Even when they saw the work of older students who wrote exceptionally well by American standards, they still expressed doubts about abandoning grammar instruction altogether.

"I don't know HOW they do it, but I can't believe that spelling errors and sentence fragments disappear by themselves. Yet, I swear, that's what happens here."

"In looking over their "eleven plus exam" booklets, I couldn't help thinking they might be called "fourteen plus" back home. Could those kids stick to the point! Later I spoke to a girl about her writing. She explained that her experiences had convinced her that clarity and precision were extremely important in both speaking and writing, and that she strived for both in all of her daily life. Now I know what he meant by 'trippingly on the tongue.' "

The quotations could go on and on, but perhaps these few have reflected the consensus of our students, who, after a few weeks in British classrooms, concluded grimly that perhaps American teachers miss the boat by being so overly concerned in the subject matter discipline that they lose sight of the learners. Those who have begun teaching report that they simply cannot use workbooks, or duplicated exercise sheets, or "canned" lessons of any sort. They have difficulty following a course of study which calls for instruction in formal grammar or vocabulary books or a prescribed list of spelling words. They look instead to student-originated projects, drama and improvisation, personal writing, and classroom talk. In short, as they teach they cannot take their eyes off the students. And to this end, at least, we believe their time in England has been well spent.

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